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editorial@comp.registertartower.com

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Your Views

IEPA head comments on articles

By RENEE CIPRIANO

Special to the Rockford Register Star

As director of the Illinois EPA, I feel I must comment on this June 23 series of articles discussing the Southeast Rockford Groundwater Contamination project.

Your reporter, Gayle Worland, provided the reader with a thorough history of the site and identified many of the issues our agency and the United States EPA have been working with for many years.

I DO FEEL, however, that the headlines and the editorial titled "Danger below" may have caused unnecessary concern by citizens of the area.

From the beginning, the Illinois EPA has taken all possible public health risks under consideration and has taken all necessary measures to ensure that public health and the environment have been protected.

The first issue I must address is in the article "Superfund zones present new dangers for residents."

There are no new "dangers." The contamination has been there for many years, and removing the risk to the health and safety of residents was the first action taken in this long, complicated process.

GUEST COLUMN

The article, though, questions the validity of the 1993 basement air sampling. While the reporter is correct that there were some "data qualifiers" in the collection and sampling, the analysis of results considered the safety of the homeowner in all cases.

Data qualifiers are common when dealing with concentrations as tiny as parts per billion. It simply means that the data have to be re-evaluated to make sure that all methods for collection and analysis produce valid results. Illinois EPA toxicologists determined that the results were valid.

ANOTHER ISSUE raised in the series of articles was the selection of homes to test. Worland seemed concerned that not all homes in the target area were tested. We selected homes that were closest to the areas of highest contamination and therefore the most likely to be affected by vapors. The other criteria we used were: Does the home have a basement and would the homeowner allow us access to do sampling? Because a basement is below ground, it is more likely to absorb vapors from soils.

I must reiterate that we selected homes to test based on our concern that there was some potential for contamination.

PLEASE NOTE also that the Illinois EPA has no plans "to excavate below the [Ekberg] park" as stated in a cutline below a photo on Page 3. We only plan to install underground piping and extraction wells, which will require some digging. There will be no excavation and removal of soils for treatment in the park.

I am also concerned with the headline "State EPA censors documents after newspaper checks."

The article explains that only information considered private was removed. This is not censorship; it is individual privacy. Illinois Freedom of Information legislation protects the privacy of individual homeowners.

Our agency is very responsive to requests for information from the public, but we also make every effort to protect the privacy of individuals whose homes or properties may be affected by environmental contamination. Only names and addresses were removed, nothing else.

As the Environmental Protection Agency for the state of Illinois, our charge is to ensure that human health and the environment are protected. We take this duty seriously and the decisions we make are always toward that goal. We made sure the residents were protected early on by seeing that they were provided bottled water; then their homes were connected to a public water supply. We also conducted basement sampling based on our concerns for the residents in the area and will resample this year for the same reason.

FINALLY, WE have completed the Remedy Decision for the Southeast Rockford Superfund site to remove sources of future contamination. The remedies that we chose to control the sources were designed to remove the threat of vapors migrating into area basements in the future.

As we have done in the past, we will continue to both inform and involve the public in our process, and we will continue to consider and address the concerns raised.

Renee Cipriano is director of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency